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UNCLAS LIMA 004933

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SUBJECT: BEATRIZ MERINO SWORN IN AS OMBUDSMAN

REF: LIMA 4265

1. Former Prime Minister Beatriz Merino was sworn in as the new Public Ombudsman on 11/16. On the very day of her swearing in, Merino demonstrated her political clout by obtaining assurances from Prime Minister Pedro Pablo Kuczynski to countermand proposed budget cuts that would have forced the closure of at least nine of the Ombudsman's regional offices. Merino replaces acting Ombudsman Walter Alban, who had an extended four-year interim tenure due to Congress' difficulty in settling on a permanent replacement for Jorge Santistevan, who resigned in 2001 to run for the presidency.

2. Merino's acceptance speech stressed her independence, emphasizing that the Ombudsman's Office is an autonomous agency and not subservient to the government in power. She said that her top priorities will be promoting ethics among public servants to combat fraud and corruption, adding that the Ombudsman's most effective weapon is its moral authority.

3. COMMENT: Merino was a highly popular prime minister, with 60 percent-plus approval ratings, and she was elected Ombudsman with the strong support of all major political parties. Educated in the U.S. and a long-time legal counsel for Procter & Gamble, Merino has cultivated strong ties with the Embassy, and we expect to work closely with her in promoting human rights and democracy in her new assignment.
END COMMENT.
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